

Stephen Shaw Interview Transcript

Reviewer: Mr. Shaw, thank you for letting us come and meet with you today. You said you've been interviewed in the past for one of these reviews, so you have a basic understanding of why we're here. We've reviewed Javier's case file and have had several interviews already and want to get your perspective on some of the things that have happened in his case. We've gathered a lot of information today, so we'll just focus in on a few things that we need clarification on. As you know, we're not here to intervene in Javier's case in any way. But it's important for us to know what DCFS is doing well and what needs to be improved, so we'll know how well the Department is meeting the needs of the children and families that it's involved with. Overall, the goal is to make sure families and children have good outcomes. The information you give us will be confidential and won't be shared with the caseworker. First, tell us about Javier's placement at Gateway. What kind of adjustment do you think he's made, and how stable is his placement?

Stephen Shaw: Javier's been with us 9 months now. He's adjusted very well to life at Gateway, and Gateway seems to be a good fit for him. He's comfortable here with the structure, is involved in our activities, relates well to the other kids, and particularly likes the LGBTQ groups. We're very committed to Javier. Vanessa asked us to sign a Planned Permanent Living Arrangement form agreeing to keep Javier at least until he's 18, and we didn't hesitate. He's a great kid.

Reviewer: Tell us what you know about Javier's plan change from reunification to OPPLA. Do you think OPPLA is an appropriate goal for him?

Stephen Shaw: It's too bad Javier wasn't able to be reunified with his aunt and uncle. There are some real bonds there, but they just can't accept his sexual orientation. We would have worked with them, as Vanessa would have, to try to get him back home, but they were totally resistant to making any changes. I know that Vanessa and Mr. Jamison, Javier's therapist here at Gateway, really worked hard with Javier to make sure he understood the ramifications of having an OPPLA plan. I talked to him some about it myself, and I believe he did have a good understanding of OPPLA vs. adoption. I think the OPPLA goal is appropriate for where Javier is in his life right now.

Reviewer: We're aware that most of the Gomezes visits with Javier take place at Gateway. We know you're not in the room with them all the time, but from what you've observed, do you feel that the visits are of good quality?

Stephen Shaw: Sometimes I pop in on them just to check and see how things are going. And, yes, I do think the visits are good quality. They all chat about what's going on in their lives, what's going on with the relatives, and things like that. They avoid bringing up anything that would cause tension or a disagreement.

Reviewer: How do you feel the Department has done at assessing Javier's needs overall?

Stephen Shaw: I know that Javier had a mental health assessment by a psychiatrist when he first came into care. Vanessa has good talks with Javier to keep up with what's going on in his life and what he needs. She stays in touch with me, the therapist, and other Gateway staff to find out what we think Javier needs. We always pass on information to her that we think she needs to know about Javier. There's one area of need he has, though, and I'm not sure

Vanessa acknowledges it. Javier really would like to have more of a relationship with his birth parents. Apparently they're trying hard right now to get their lives together, and I think it's definitely in his interest to keep him better connected with them. The lack of a relationship with them has caused a real void in his life. We've spoken to Vanessa about this several times, but she just doesn't seem to buy in that it's a need for him. Or maybe she's just overloaded.

Reviewer: What can you tell us about how well the Department has met Javier's needs? And we're not talking right now about education, physical health, or mental health, but about things outside of those areas.

Stephen Shaw: I think Vanessa, with the exception of the birth parent connection, stays on top of things and makes sure Javier has what he needs. She really encourages his drama activities. She makes sure his family visits, and she keeps up with what's happening overall in his life and tries to see that he gets what he needs. The school counselor, at the end of last school term, recommended that Javier's artistic talents be promoted more. Vanessa remembered that, and, when Javier was registering for classes this semester, she helped him work in a pottery class—which he really likes, by the way.

Reviewer: Tell us about the transitional living or life skills services that Javier's received since he's been placed at Gateway.

Stephen Shaw: That's probably a place where we've all dropped the ball a little. We've had problems keeping our IL Coordinator position filled here. Our last person started June 1st, then left in late August for a better job. She was really good, and we hated to lose her. My recollection is that Javier and the other kids had an online money management course back in the spring. Then, after the IL Coordinator came, she did some really neat things with them over the summer in money management, housing, and meal preparation. She had a knack for presenting things in a fun, engaging way, and the kids were really learning a lot. So basically, since Javier's been at Gateway, the life skills services from us have been pretty fragmented.

Reviewer: Did the Department step in during the gaps and try to figure out other ways that Javier could have life skills training and experiences?

Stephen Shaw: To be frank, to my knowledge, Vanessa didn't do anything in that arena. She seemed to expect Gateway to do it all.

Reviewer: Did Javier have any kind of life skills experiences this month, September?

Stephen Shaw: No, not that I know of. It's possible he learned something through "teachable moments" from some of the other staff, but he hasn't gotten anything formal or structured.

Reviewer: We noticed in the case file that you and Javier were to meet with the school counselor this month to talk about Javier's applying to colleges. Did that meeting happen?

Stephen Shaw: Indeed it did. We met with her, and Javier got a lot of good information and came away really fired up. I'll be following up with him to see that he doesn't lose his motivation.

Reviewer: Can you tell us about Javier's desire to have part-time employment?

Stephen Shaw: You can see I'm squirming a little here. Javier identified getting a job as his top priority when we did his Transitional Living Plan several months ago. Every kid here would like a job, and they all need lots of preparation and help, so we pretty much have to put that responsibility back on their Department caseworkers or at least share it with them. Vanessa was supposed to find a mentor to help Javier fill out applications and look for a job, but that never happened. I'm not sure why. And we at Gateway have been so busy doing all of our other stuff that we haven't been able to help out.

Reviewer: Tell us about Javier's therapy services and how you think he's doing with his depression.

Stephen Shaw: Javier's therapist says he's really working on his issues and doing well. The therapist is particularly focusing with him on coping skills he'll need because of his sexual orientation. He's in a pretty sheltered environment here at Gateway, but there's a big world out there that he'll have to deal with when he goes out on his own. Another big area of focus has been helping him cope with the rejection from the Gomezes and even from his birth parents. He's made a lot of progress with that.

Reviewer: What can you tell us about Javier's psychotropic medication?

Stephen Shaw: We dutifully make sure he takes it every day, but he complains from time to time that he doesn't like the way it makes him feel. He has checks with Dr. Pemberly every 3 months, but those sound like "drive-bys" to me. I don't think the doctor really listens to what Javier has to say. He just keeps refilling the prescription. I wonder if Javier continues to need it. Maybe it would be better for him to learn to cope with things in other ways besides through medication.

Reviewer: Has the Department advocated for Javier around his medication issues?

Stephen Shaw: No, not that I'm aware of. We've passed on our concerns to Vanessa, as has Javier. As far as I know, though, she hasn't made any attempts to talk to Dr. Pemberly or get a second opinion. I think Javier needs an updated assessment by a different doctor. Vanessa wants us to take the lead on this, but since the Department is legal custodian of Javier, we see it as Vanessa's responsibility. She's a good caseworker, and she does a lot for Javier, but this medication issue is something that's just fallen through the cracks with her. I guess we need to remind her again.

Reviewer: I think that's all of the questions we have for you. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us that we haven't asked you about?

Stephen Shaw: No, I think you covered the major issues.

Reviewer: Thank you so much for your time and for your honesty and candor. You've been really helpful, and we appreciate it very much.